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DE RUEHLB #0451/01 0911538

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O 311538Z MAR 08

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1400

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 1129

RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 2083

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000451

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DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, NEA/IPA, PRM/FO, AND PM/FO
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER
TREASURY FOR U/S LEVEY
DEPT PASS TO EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/30/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM PINR KPAL MASS SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA GRATEFUL FOR INL ASSISTANCE,
BUT STRESSES NEED TO ADDRESS ROOT PROBLEMS

BEIRUT 00000451 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons
section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) PM Fouad Siniora dismissed the March 29-30 Arab League summit in Damascus as a "non-summit," and held out little expectation that the Arab League would find a solution to Lebanon's ongoing political crisis. His government had managed to perform surprisingly well given the unprecedented challenges, but it would need the continuing political and financial support of the international community. Siniora expressed his appreciation to visiting INL Assistant Secretary David Johnson for continuing U.S. law enforcement

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assistance to Lebanon. However, such assistance only targeted the symptoms of the problem, he claimed; its real roots lay in the Arab-Israeli conflict. End summary.

¶2. (C) Visiting INL Assistant Secretary David Johnson, accompanied by Charge, Post INL Director Virginia Ramadan, Pol/Econ Chief, White House Fellow Kathryn Spletstoser and INL officers Adam Bloomquist, and Cassandra Stuart, met with PM Siniora at his office in the Grand Serail on March 31. Internal Security Forces (ISF) General Ashraf Rifi and Siniora senior advisors Mohamad Chatah and Rola Noureddine also attended the meeting. Septel will cover A/S Johnson's visit to Beirut and INL issues.

ARAB LEAGUE "NON-SUMMIT"

¶3. (C) Reacting to what he dubbed the March 29-30 Arab League "non-summit" in Damascus, Siniora blamed Syrian intransigence for the ongoing political crisis in Lebanon, saying the Syrians were not allowing Lebanon to implement its own constitution. He did not expect them to play a more constructive role after the summit than they had before, with Lebanon's democracy at stake. Siniora said the Arab League initiative was now in "intensive care," but it remained the "only game in town." It was important, he said, to keep the matter in the hands of the Arab League, until an alternative

appeared.

¶4. (C) Siniora also dismissed Speaker Berri's proposal to relaunch the National Dialogue, stating it was Berri himself who closed the door to parliament in the first place. Now, the fight had been taken to the street, where people were using the language of the street, and street weapons. Furthermore, Berri, as leader of Amal, was by definition a party animal and not suited to play the role of arbitrator, therefore it was not up to him to set the agenda for talks. (Note: Berri wants the Dialogue to focus on cabinet formation and the electoral law. End note.)

¶5. (C) Siniora said his government had been able to hold fast despite a "wave of tsunamis." Parliament had now been closed for 17 months, and Lebanese politicians were afraid to move in the streets for fear of the "killing machines." Lebanon is a model for the Arab world, but it needs continuing international support to protect its democracy; any defect will have a ripple effect regionally, he warned.

¶6. (C) Siniora also his government's economic achievements had been "extraordinary," surpassing expectations, but the lost opportunities had also been tremendous. Lebanon probably lost 20 percent in potential GDP growth over the last three years, he said, and did not benefit from the increased spending resulting from the recent oil boom in the region.

¶7. (C) On the Special Tribunal, Siniora opined that UNIIIC's mandate probably would be extended. As he said in his March 28 speech, all Lebanon wanted was "the truth and nothing but the truth." This was not meant to criticize Syria, but to put an end to the Syrian game of immunity.

GRATEFUL FOR U.S. ASSISTANCE,
BUT NEED TO ADDRESS ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

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¶8. (C) Siniora said INL's \$60 million in police training and equipment assistance to the Internal Security Forces (ISF), by creating a secure and democratic police structure, had not only a political impact, but also ensured basic human rights.

Training and equipment for the ISF allowed the ISF to provide better services to the Lebanese people, i.e., by allowing it to control demonstrations. Support for Lebanon's financial institutions also was important. However, such assistance was only "first aid" for a much deeper ailment. In addition, Siniora repeated several times during the meeting, we need to address the roots of the problem, which he cited as the continuing of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israeli occupation of Arab lands, and the Palestinian problem.

¶9. (C) These problems, he said, contribute to extremism in the Arab world, the deterioration of socio-economic conditions in Lebanon, and ultimately sets the state for drug traffickers and criminals. The village of Ghajjar, inhabited by "gypsies" (Ghajjar means gypsy in Arabic), was a perfect example of Israeli occupation preventing the rule of law from functioning. A/S Johnson agreed that providing training and equipment was a necessary but not sufficient condition, and that the deeper political issues needed to be addressed as well, as the U.S. was working doggedly to do, as evidenced by the Secretary's presence in the region at that moment.

¶10. (C) As a result of the 1969 Cairo accord, the Arab League granted the Palestinian camps in Lebanon extraterritorial sovereignty and they have been "microstates", acting as a magnet for criminals of all kind, Siniora said. Ain el-Hilwe, the largest Palestinian camp, contains many different factions with no one single dominant group. The GOL controls entry and exit into the camp, but nothing that goes on within them, and these camps have been converted into

"hatcheries of violence." Youth in the camps are unable to find employment except from those who give them guns, which only prepares them for violence, creating a vicious circle.

¶11. (C) We need to find a permanent solution to this 60-year old Palestinian problem, Siniora stressed, but so far Israel has not been willing to engage in a real solution, such as the 2002 Arab peace initiative of then Prince, now King, Abdallah proposing a real peace based on 1967 borders. Israel can't break the 300 million Arabs, he said, even though they've tried with every weapon except the nuclear one. Violence has not produced much, and is not sustainable; the only way out is to solve the heart of the issue and bring hope to the region.

¶12. (C) Other forces, influenced by Syria and Iran, are using the Israeli occupation, Arab-Israeli conflict, and Palestinian problem effectively to promote their own agenda, Siniora maintained. Iran has been allowed to hijack most of our causes in the region, as if it alone has taken on the role of defender of Islam. But Iran's real objective is not to protect Islam, but its own "Persian agenda."

COMMENT

¶13. (C) PM Siniora's launch into his favorite discourse about the Israeli-Arab situation and Palestinian refugees with A/S Johnson was typical of his first-time meetings with high-ranking U.S. officials. It does not reflect any negative view concerning the \$60 million USG police train and equip program, about which the GOL remains extremely positive. End comment.

¶14. (U) A/S Johnson has cleared this message.

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